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DECORATION & FURNITURE

CORRECT PRINCIPLES IN FURNITURE.



WHILE Dr. Dresser was art editor of *The London Furniture Gazette*, he set forth in its pages his ideas on this subject in a very lucid manner. Since then there has happily been a decided improvement in the construction of furniture in this country, undoubtedly attributable to English influence. Our cabinet-makers and upholsterers in copying the "fashions" in English furniture, however, have too often failed to appreciate the principles upon which it has been constructed. We republish Dr. Dresser's views, not only for their benefit, but also for that of the public, who should insist on the maintenance of a high artistic standard:

Construction is the first thing to be considered, for, however costly may be the materials employed, and however lavish the ornamentation, a piece of furniture which is ill-constructed can neither be useful nor beautiful. When a plain piece of furniture, such as an oak or deal-table, sideboard or dressoir—to use the old word, from which our *dresser* is derived—is thoroughly adapted to its purpose, and has all its parts in due proportion, it is an object upon which the cultivated eye rests with great satisfaction, and a very slight amount of ornamentation will render it an object of beauty. When the decoration is carried farther it becomes an object of art.

To deserve the name of object of art, or decorative furniture, certain principles must be kept constantly in view, and these principles may be briefly stated as follows:

1. In the construction of any piece of furniture the first thing to be considered is its general form or shape as a mass; for when seen from a distance this is what alone catches the eye.

2. The most convenient form must be selected for every piece of furniture, for utility must be the first consideration in its production.

3. The material most suited to the construction of the work must next be chosen.

4. Having selected the general form for the object, it must be divided into primary and secondary parts, with due regard to the laws of proportion.

5. The parts necessary as constructive members may now be enriched with ornament for close inspection; but ornaments must not be constructed or applied, and should be but sparingly used.

6. The method of construction should be apparent in every work of furniture, for a hidden construction fails to satisfy the eye.

7. Material should be so used that the maximum amount of strength is gained with its smallest expenditure.

8. In woodwork the arch should never be used as a structural feature.

9. The details and enrichments must always be subordinate to the general plan of the work.


The principle No. 7 may be more fully illustrated, thus: Each kind of wood has what is called a grain, that is to say fibres running in the direction of the length of the log, and, whatever be the relative strength of the wood, it is always at its greatest when used in the direction of the grain; every departure from this principle tends to weakness, and the greatest degree of weakness is attained when the wood is employed transversely or across the grain. In the selection and application of different species of wood, not only strength

be obtained of sufficient length and strength for all the purposes of the cabinet-maker; and, secondly, in a true arch the wood would have to be cut against the grain—that is to say, in the worst manner. In stonework the arch is a most admirable arrangement, enabling the builder to span streams and arch over spaces, which without it would be all but impossible. In the manufacture of furniture it has no place. But there is no reason why arched lines or curves should not be used in the way of decoration, avoiding the pretence of the real use of the arch.

The articles of furniture in the greatest demand are

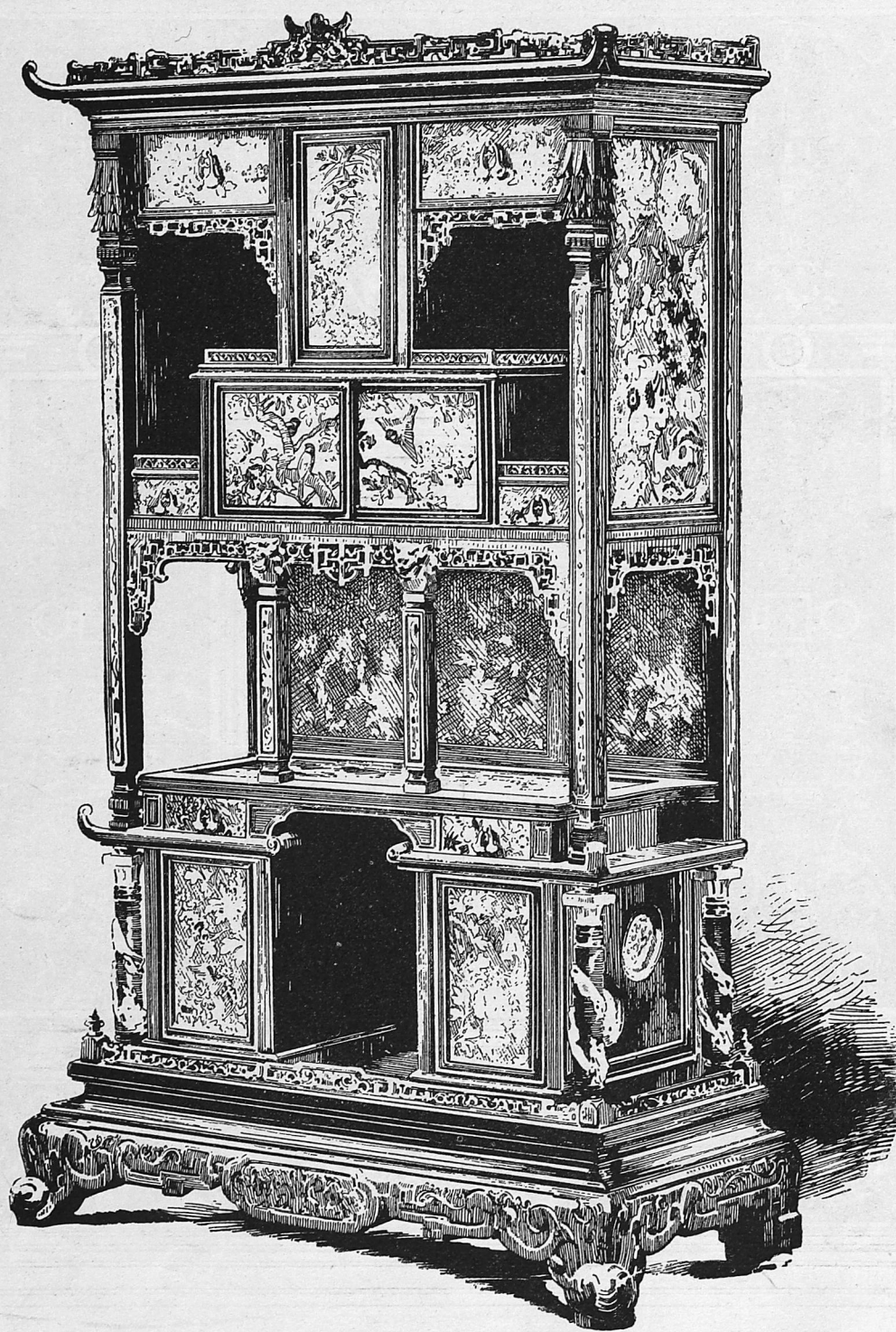
chairs. The simplest of all seats is a stool, and the simplest stool is a flat piece of wood, with three or more legs inserted in holes made in the seat. If these holes be made through the seat, and the legs be firmly wedged in their places, the stool, though clumsy, is well constructed; but when lightness or elegance, or the two combined, are desired, then the legs are connected by a frame, on which the seat is placed. A chair is really a stool, with a rest for the back added to it; and, it may be added, a sofa is an elongated chair. The same principles, therefore, apply to all, with this exception, that the chair, if ill-constructed, becomes dangerous to the sitter. In the large Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic chairs, the construction is generally both solid and elegant, the wood being employed in its natural manner, and the structure often strengthened by brackets and angle-pieces added to the back and legs. The great majority of modern chairs, including those in the much-lauded styles of Louis XV. and Louis XVI., are neither useful nor ornamental. When the sides, framing, and arms are all bowed, one of two things must occur: either the chair is weak and unsafe from the fact of the wood being cut across the grain, or, to obtain strength, it is made inconveniently heavy. It is no exaggeration to say that, in some of the old massive library arm-chairs of the last century as much wood was used as would, if properly applied, have sufficed for two or three, and the chair itself is too heavy to be lifted without an effort. A plain Windsor chair is superior in point of structure to such a mass of oak or mahogany as that referred to.

Among ancient forms of chairs there is one which is in favor, but which is peculiarly false and bad in construction. It is that in which the supports—they cannot be called legs—present the form of the letter X placed on its side

thus , each of the two arcs being a heavy clumsy piece of wood cut against the grain.*

There has, undoubtedly, been an immense improvement made in chairs of late; but this only applies to superior furniture, designed by artists and manufactured by careful cabinet-makers. The ordinary chair of the shops is almost as ill-constructed as it can be. The same principles apply, of course, to all other

* A camp-stool is a useful thing enough to carry about and sit on for a time, but to adopt it as a pattern for a chair intended to be durable is glaringly absurd.



JAPANESE CABINET. BY ALPHONSE GIROUX.

WITH DECORATIONS OF BRONZE, SILVER, AND CLOISONNÉ.

but hardness and other qualities have to be considered; box, ebony, and some other woods are extremely hard, but possess little grain, while the grain is very marked in pine, oak, and mahogany.

One of the misapplications of wood is that of applying it in the form of an arch in the construction of furniture, and such an application is all the more absurd from the fact that it is generally a mere pretence, and has really nothing to do with the structure at all. No arch is required in the formation of articles of furniture for two reasons. In the first place, wood is always to

furniture besides chairs. Tables require to be peculiarly firm and steady, yet nearly all the fancy forms common in stores seem constructed with the special view to their becoming rickety at an early age. Another kind of table, the expanding dining-table, presents glaring faults peculiar to itself. In order that the table may be increased or diminished, according to the number of persons dining, an elaborate framing is contrived which allows of the insertion of a spare leaf or leaves; this framing is necessarily heavy and costly, and scarcely ever works in a satisfactory manner for a long period; and the legs, to support the heavy framework, are made of preposterous size. But the crowning offence against all principles of construction in these telescope-tables is, that the outer framing of the table, that which should give the necessary solidity and steadiness, is a mere sham, as seen when the table is pulled out, and the side looks as if a piece had been cut out of it. Such a piece of furniture is a disgrace to England. It is a question whether any other nation in Europe has ever adopted it.

Let any one who has studied the principles above referred to, pay a visit to a furniture warehouse, or even study the furniture of an ordinary dwelling-house, and see how far they are generally acted upon. Instead of good, simple, well-studied forms, he will find complicated curves, bowed legs, tortuous arms, rickety legs, and supports which seem by their extraordinary shapes to be intended for early destruction. He will find the wood cut in all manner of oblique and cross directions, and, to crown all, he will find that the mahogany, rosewood, or maple dressing-table, cheval-glass, or what not, is a common, ill-made deal structure, concealed by thin veneer, which a very slight blow will chip off, exposing the sham to the world. The disappointment, the disgust which much of this kind of furniture occasions should have condemned it long since, but until the principles of art are better understood than they are at present, showy furniture will sell, and, consequently, will be produced.

With regard to veneering, it is pleasant to note that all the best specimens of English furniture which carried off high honors at the last Paris Exhibition were composed of solid wood, generally applied according to true principles, and in many cases exhibiting great elegance with most commendable simplicity.

In proceeding from chairs and tables to more complicated pieces of furniture, other points in construction have to be considered. Cabinets, dressoirs, *étagères*, and chiffoniers, consist of more than one, often of several, parts, and the proportions of these to each other require careful consideration. No absolute rules can be laid down, except that an equal division into halves in the height of a piece of furniture is always objectionable; the one part should be a few inches

higher than the other. If drawers are to differ in size, the larger must generally be the lower one. The relative width of panels and styles is also an important subject, and must be studied and experimented on carefully. Above all, avoid shams of all kinds. If heavy cornices or other pieces require support, columns, pilasters, and brackets are all legitimate, but when such features are attached, not to the solid framing, but to opening doors or drawers, they are ridiculous, and the work is contemptible as regards design, and in all cases they must be used as wood, and not as so

THE SGRAFFITI OF THE CORSI PALACE.

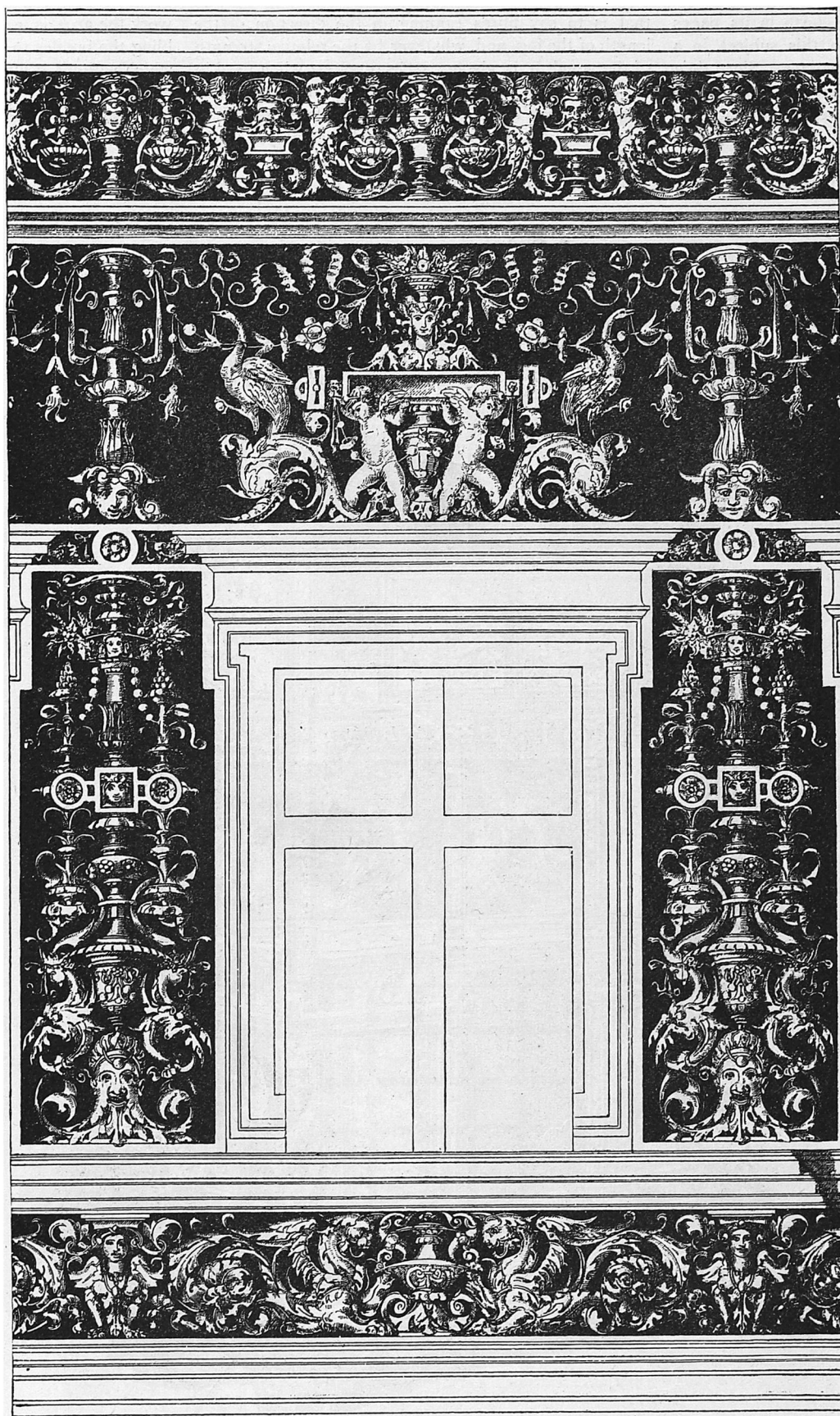
THE sgraffito (or sgraffitura, as the process is sometimes called) decorations of the Corsi Palace, in Florence, have long been much admired by artists and architects; but, owing to the partial dilapidation of this very interesting work, no attempt has been made until quite recently to give a reproduction of it. It has been done at last by an architect, who, we need hardly say, is a painstaking German. With admirable industry and skill this gentleman (Mr. Bruno Seidler, of Dresden) has supplied the missing portions of the decoration, and has furnished drawings all complete to the "*Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*," from which publication we take the liberty of borrowing them.

The Corsi Palace stands in the Via Tornabuoni. It was formerly known as the Tornabuoni Palace. The most dilapidated portion of the decoration is the façade facing the Church of San Gaetano in the Via de' Corsi. The sgraffiti of the smaller façade facing the Via Pescioni are in a fair state of preservation. Those of the upper stories are in such good condition that the decoration could be reproduced almost in detail; but the sgraffiti of the lower story are ruinously defaced with white-wash and coarse signs of business firms.

It is supposed that the builder was Baccio d'Agnolo, and, judging from its resemblance to some of his work in Perugia, he may also have been the decorator. But the sgraffiti are generally believed to be more recent work than the building. Vasari attributes them to Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini, who lived in the latter part of the sixteenth century. The original building was as old, probably, as the early part of that century. It was remodelled in 1840, when the street was widened.

The sgraffito process was described in our columns for the information of a correspondent, in an early number of *THE ART AMATEUR*; but it may not be amiss, in connection with our illustrations of the decorations of the Corsi Palace, to repeat part of the description given then: What is called the "floating" coat of ordinary plaster, which is usually three quarters of an inch thick, is first applied to the wall. Then a layer of black or any dark colored plaster is

laid about a quarter of an inch thick, and above this another layer much thinner and lighter in color. A charcoal drawing of the design to be executed having been prepared, it is either traced or printed on the wet plaster. The upper layer of plaster is then cut through with a sharp knife, and being scraped away, exposes the black wherever it is wanted to appear. In this way any ornament or subject which can be represented in two tints can be executed very effectively, and by the use of three layers more complicated effects can be produced. We should like to see the sgraffito process applied to the decoration of mansions in this city.



SGRAFFITO DECORATION OF THE MAIN STORY OF THE CORSI PALACE.

much stone. Another error is to give cabinets an architectural character by furnishing them with a roof. Now a cabinet or dressoir is not a house but a piece of furniture to be kept within doors; therefore a roof is a ridiculous appendage—a water-pipe would be about as much in place.

THE Rev. H. J. Bigge, an English clergyman, has called attention to a prevalent fault of making a reredos so important as to reduce the altar to insignificance. The majority of these structures in modern times, he says, are unmeaning, and might well be dispensed with.